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HEALTHY AGING DEPENDS ON A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

(RICHMOND, Va.)—By the year 2025, Virginians age 60 and over will represent nearly 25 percent of the total state population. According to the Virginia Department for the Aging, the number of residents age 85 and older is growing five times faster than the rest of the population. People are definitely living longer, but not necessarily healthier. In fact, the incidence of chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes is on the rise among senior citizens.

Chronic diseases are the leading causes of death and disability in the United States, but they are also the most preventable. Poor health and loss of independence are not inevitable consequences of aging. People can enjoy healthier golden years by making smart choices earlier in life.

Research has shown that healthy behaviors such as eating nutritious food, staying physically active and steering clear of tobacco are more influential than genetic factors in helping individuals avoid the physical decline often associated with aging.

“Our life span today is 30 years longer than for those born in 1900. These added years can be healthy, enjoyable and productive if we adopt healthy lifestyles and prevent or manage chronic diseases,” said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H.

The Virginia Department of Health’s (VDH) Office of Family Health Services offers the following advice on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle that promotes healthy aging.

- **Get active.** Regular physical activity decreases your risk of heart disease, colon cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure, and contributes to healthy bones, muscles and joints. Participate in moderate-intensity aerobic activities, such as walking or swimming, three to five days a week for at least 30 minutes each session. Stretch every day to increase flexibility. Do strength-building activities two to three days a week, which helps prevent sarcopenia, the muscle deterioration that comes with aging.
- **Stick to a healthy diet.** Eat foods low in saturated fats and high in fiber with five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day. This can extend your lifespan and reduce heart disease, stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis and some types of cancer. Food can also contribute to your social, cultural and psychological quality of life.
- **Avoid tobacco.** Tobacco use is the single most preventable cause of death and disease in the United States. Call the Virginia Department of Health’s quit line (800) QUIT NOW and get a self-help quit kit or on-line counseling to kick the habit.
- **Take care of your teeth and gums.** Visit your dentist regularly and brush and floss your teeth at least twice a day. Bacteria that cause gum disease and tooth decay can travel through the blood stream, contributing to heart disease and stroke and posing serious threats to people who have diabetes, respiratory diseases or osteoporosis. Get an oral cancer examination at least once a year.
- **Treat depression when it occurs.** It is not a normal part of healthy aging. Many effective treatments are available, and your doctor can help you decide what treatment is right for you.

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- **Get regular immunizations.** Especially for pneumonia and influenza, which are among the top 10 causes of death for older adults. For those 65 and older, one pneumonia shot for life is sufficient. Get a flu shot every year beginning at age 50. A tetanus-diphtheria booster is recommended every 10 years regardless of age.
- **Prevent injuries.** Falls are the leading cause of injuries among older adults. They can be prevented with exercise to improve strength, balance and flexibility, and home modifications to reduce hazards. Adults over 65 are twice as likely to die in a home fire as the rest of the population. For safety tips visit VDH's Home Safe Home Web page at www.vahealth.org/civp/homesafehome.

Staying focused on your overall wellness will help you and your family age well. Visit Virginia's SeniorNavigator Web site at www.seniornavigator.com and click on "Aging Well" for valuable tips and articles to help prevent aging-related diseases, promote a healthy mind and body and increase your quality of life.

For more information on keeping healthy no matter how old you are, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov and click on Healthy Living.

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